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Reagan sending \$20 million in aid to Honduras

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WASHINGTON — President Reagan, responding to an urgent Honduran plea for military assistance to fend off a Nicaraguan incursion, yesterday provided \$20 million in logistical aid.

Reagan's action came as the Senate appeared ready to approve \$100 million in aid for Nicaraguan rebels, or contras, who are based mostly in Honduras.

The \$20 million, according to the White House, provides U.S. military supplies and American-piloted helicopters to lift Honduran troops into a remote area in southern Honduras where a reported 1,500 Nicaraguan troops crossed the border on Saturday to attack rebel strongholds.

White House spokesman Larry Speakes said the airlift, by transporting the Hondurans to areas adjacent to the fighting, would not expose the American pilots to hostilities.

Reagan has the authority, under a special provision of the Foreign Assistance Act, to provide emergency aid to allies, subject to later review by Congress.

Charles Redman, a State Department spokesman, said Gen. John Galvin, head of the U.S. military command in Central America, had been sent to Honduras with instructions to make "every effort [to] avoid placing members of the United States armed forces into situations where imminent involvement in hostilities" might occur.

There are about 2,800 U.S. military personnel stationed in Honduras.

As Nicaragua's Sandinista forces clashed in Honduras with the rebel contras, the Senate moved closer to a vote this week on Reagan's proposal to provide \$70 million in military and \$30 million in nonlethal assistance to the contras.

While Senate leaders attempted to fashion a compromise that would attract a majority of senators, the controlling Republicans — noting the Sandinista border violation in Honduras — seemed determined to pass the President's plan, with or without Democratic votes.

Democrats who have been resisting a no-strings-attached approval of

Reagan's contra aid proposal acknowledged that the Sandinista incursion had strengthened Reagan's hand.

Sen. Patrick Leahy (D., Vt.), ranking minority member of the Senate Intelligence Committee, facetiously observed that Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega appeared to be in the pay of U.S. intelligence agencies "as a lobbyist for Reagan's plan."

Senate Majority Leader Robert Dole (R., Kan.) confirmed that compromise negotiations with Democrats were inching forward yesterday, but he indicated that many Republicans now felt that the aggressive Sandinistas had to be countered — whether the Democrats agree or not.

"I believe we have the votes," Dole said, "without the concessions [demanded by the Democrats]." Ortega, he added, "has shot himself in the foot. If anyone had any doubts about what the Sandinistas have in mind, this might indicate what it was."

In Tegucigalpa, the Honduran capital, there were confusing signals all day as the government initially denied asking for the U.S. aid and then admitted that it had. Indeed, for almost two days, the Honduran government denied the existence of the

Nicaraguan troops on its soil.

Because of the confusion, Sen. David Durenberger (R., Minn.), chairman of the Intelligence Committee, said he placed little stock in any of the intelligence issuing from the region.

"I'm never satisfied with the intelligence I get," Durenberger complained. "I don't trust our own agencies." And he hinted that he thought the White House might be orchestrating the flow of information from the area because of Reagan's determination to provide aid to the contras.

Reagan "is widening the war into Honduras now," Durenberger charged.

Even as the Minnesota Republican groused about the dearth of reliable information, Democrats who had opposed Reagan's aid package, urging instead renewed efforts to negotiate with the Sandinistas, were clearly embarrassed by the Nicaraguan incursion.

House Speaker Thomas P. O'Neill Jr. (D., Mass.), who led that chamber in rejecting Reagan's plan last week, was particularly incensed by what he appeared to perceive as a double-cross by Ortega.

O'Neill called the Sandinista leader "a bumbling, incompetent, Marxist-Leninist communist" who had authorized "an aggression" against Honduras.

The White House, barely concealing its glee at O'Neill's discomfort, moved swiftly to blame the Sandinista incursion on the House's rejection of the President's aid proposal.

Asked if there was a direct link between the two events, Speakes suppressed a smile and replied: "The facts speak for themselves. Within 48 hours [after the House vote], this was started."

The Senate is expected to vote late today or tomorrow on the Reagan aid package. The House has recessed for Easter, but a few conservatives — led by Rep. Jack Kemp (R., N.Y.) — have urged the President to call that chamber back into special session to reconsider last week's contra vote.